

SPECIAL REPORT

Widescreen Presentation

How do they make widescreen movies?

Ever wonder why the movie companies make wide-screen movies? One of the reasons we have widescreen movies was a reaction, by the movie studios, to television. Originally movies were filmed in a standard aspect ratio (the relationship between the width and height) nearly identical to that of today's television. However as television grew in popularity the studios, fearful of a loss in revenue, made a change in the aspect ratio (see *Aspect Ratios*) in which major motion pictures were filmed.

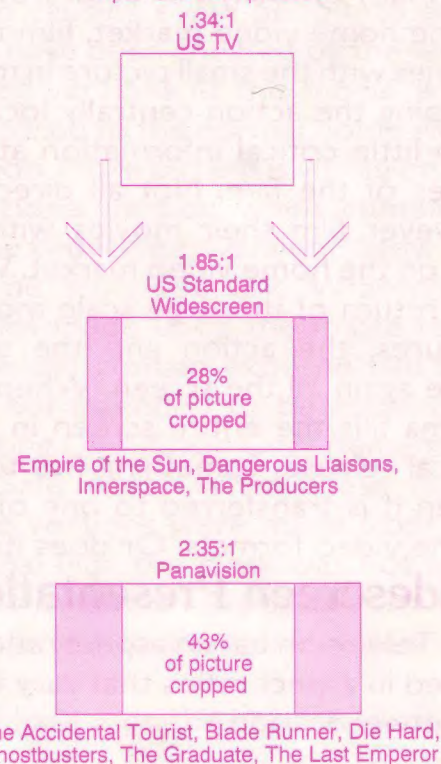
There are many techniques used by today's directors to make the modern film epics. For the sake of this discussion we'll examine two of the most popular. The most popular widescreen format today is Panavision, the other is the use of a matte.

Movies made in Panavision use special cylindrical (anamorphic) lenses to distort the picture so that a 2.35:1 aspect ratio can be recorded on standard film stock. The movie theater then plays the Panavision movie through a projector also fitted with the special lens and the distortion is removed.

Because some directors object to the distortion caused by the anamorphic lenses another technique was developed to achieve the same widescreen appearance

Aspect Ratios

Aspect ratios of popular movie formats compared to US television. Shaded area represents amount of picture 'lost' in pan and scan process.



as Panavision. The method used is quite simple but the effect is to create a final product that achieves the same end. The director uses a viewfinder to frame the shot. The viewfinder is fitted with a mask that matches the aspect ratio of the movie and helps the director compose the photography. As the movie is filmed the complete frame of the film is exposed, capturing everything inside the 'safe' area and additional extraneous elements outside of the 'safe' area. When the film is released theatrically the portions outside the 'safe' area are masked or matted to remove the area of the exposed film that were not intended, by the director, to be seen.

This is where the controversy begins

As movies filmed in one of the widescreen formats began showing up on television (before home video) the movies had to be altered to fit on the small screen. Portions of the movie had to be trimmed (cropped) from the original film. The studios developed a technique known as pan and scan. The idea was to keep the main action and fill the television screen with a picture. This idea worked to a great degree but failed miserably on some widescreen epics.

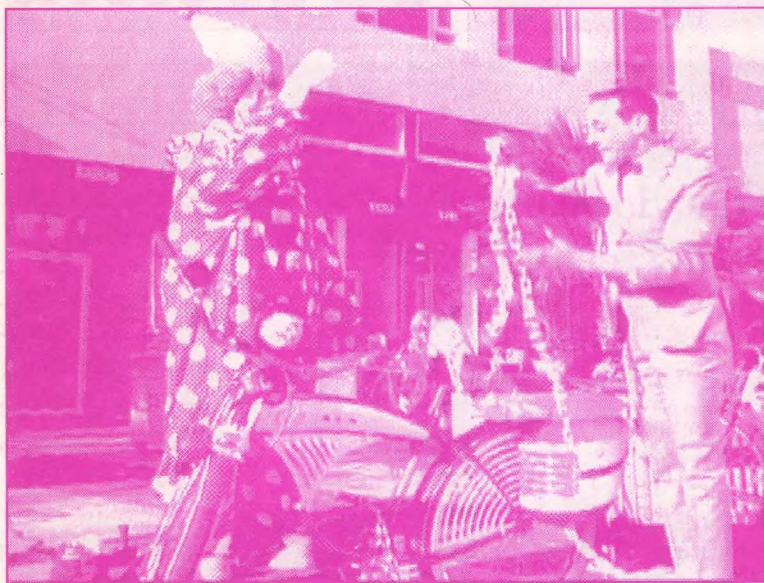
Many of today's directors, aware of the home video market, film their movies with the small picture in mind. Keeping the action centrally located with little critical information at the edges of the film. Not all directors however film their movies with an eye on the home video market. With the return of the large scale motion pictures, the action and the story once again fill the screen. When the drama fills the entire screen in theatrical release, something has to go when it is transferred to one of the home video formats. Or does it?

Widescreen Presentation

Television has an aspect ratio of 1.34:1. The picture is slightly wider than it is tall. Movies are filmed in aspect ratios that vary from 1.34:1 (Academy Ratio), to 3:1 (Cinerama) and nine sizes in between.

Exposed area outside 'safe' zone covered by matte to create wide screen aspect ratio.

'Safe Area'



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Working On A Chain Gag.

As you can see, Pee Wee Herman (Paul Rubin) is pulling an 'endless chain' from his saddle bag. In the theatrical release the bottom of the bag was covered by the matte which hid the hole in his saddle bag and the pile of chain on the ground.



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INDIANA JONES and the LAST CRUSADE

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, available from Paramount Home Video is presented in its original theatrical presentation as well as the normal home video presentation. The choice is yours.

Recently the video divisions of the motion picture industry have begun to offer films for home video in a widescreen format known as 'letterbox.' The term letterbox is supposed to have been derived by someone's impression of the view looking out through the mail slot in their door or local mail box. It describes a view that is wide but not very tall. Letterbox is not a format, but just a phrase that describes the visual appearance of the picture on the screen.

Anamorphic widescreen and matted widescreen movies can be described using the terms widescreen or 'letterbox.' These terms are used to describe the visual appearance of movies when shown in their original aspect ratio within the confines of the present day television screen.

When more is not really more.

Recently widescreen theatrical movies like *Black Rain* and *The Princess Bride* have been released to home video causing some people to think they have been cheated by the widescreen versions of the movie when compared to the normal home video version. More picture is visible on the traditional version when compared to the widescreen version. "How can this be so?", you ask. Widescreen movies made using the matte technique can contain exposed film that was not intended to be seen. (See *Working On A Chain Gag*) Remember the Safe Area? When these home video versions were made from the original film, the mask was not used and the entire exposed film was transferred to the home video version.

Hope is on the horizon for those

who love movies in a widescreen presentation as well as those who love their TV screen filled. Many of the best movies are being released both ways. Whether you love movies in their original theatrical presentation or prefer your TV screen filled, you can choose.

What's Missing

When a film is transferred to laserdisc in its original aspect ratio, nothing is missing. The film is presented to the viewer just as it was in the theater. When a film is panned and scanned for its transfer to home video, up to 50% of the movie can be removed to make it fit in the TV screen. In some films the consequence is disastrous. Main characters are removed entirely and performers hold conversations with invisible characters (see *Ghostbusters*).

On the other side though, some movies are so wide that the 'live' picture area is too small to be enjoyable on a conventional television. Resolution (picture detail) can be reduced, especially on regular video tape, so as to remove a great deal of detail.

Time to Choose

If you want to view the movie the way it was shown in the theater (the way the director intended it to be seen), buy the widescreen version. If you want to fill your television screen with the movie, buy the regular home video version.



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Ghostbusters, available from RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video is presented in its original theatrical aspect ratio as well as the normal home video presentation.

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